

FACT SHEET

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Early History of the Border Patrol

In the early 1900s, the Commissioner General of Immigration assigned a small group of mounted guards to patrol the southern border, which had become a popular gateway into the United States for Chinese immigrants prohibited from entering the country under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Europeans unable to pass inspection at Ellis Island.

The entire corps at that time never numbered more than 75 men and was inadequate to cope with the illegal entry problem at the U.S.-Mexico frontier. In addition, there were no officers available to patrol beyond the border. Once aliens escaped the border area, they generally melted into the population undetected. It was estimated that for every 100 aliens apprehended at the border, 1,000 escaped detection. As the number of illegal entries continued to increase, a separate unit

of border guards was organized in March 1914, with mounted agents supplemented with boat and car patrols. The officers' primary responsibility remained intercepting aliens from China, who were barred from immigrating to the United States, and others seeking to avoid inspection.



Figure 1. Agents in formation at El Paso, TX subdistrict, circa 1925. (INS Archive Photo)

Travel restrictions and the assignment of troops along the borders during World War I, greatly reduced illegal immigration and other criminal activity. With the close of the war, however, smuggling and illegal entry accelerated rapidly. The Bureau of Immigration then stepped up its efforts to close both the northern and southern borders between the ports of entry. The Commissioner General requested funds in 1919 for a patrol service that could devote all its energies to guarding U.S. land borders and coastlines, a request Congress denied. The arrival of Prohibition that year brought another challenge for these early officers—liquor smuggling. Like today's drug smugglers, the rum runners of the 1920s were a ruthless lot. By the time Prohibition

was ended a decade later, nearly 30 officers had lost their lives at the hands of the liquor smugglers.

Before enactment of the Immigration Act of 1917, there were few immigration restrictions applicable to Canadian and Mexican citizens. Unlike the immigrants from overseas, Canadians and Mexicans were not required to pay a head tax, and they were not compelled to take the literacy test. Those who met the relatively simple requirements of the law were free to enter in unlimited numbers. The Immigration Act of 1917, however, imposed a head tax of \$8 on Canadians and Mexicans and subjected them, like other aliens, to a reading test established in the new law. These two provisions contributed significantly to widespread illegal border crossings and increases in smuggling.

The most significant factors contributing to the rise in illegal immigration were the Immigration Quota Acts of 1921 and 1924, which established the nation's first limits on the number of people legally admitted each year. Those who had been denied immigration visas, or who refused to wait for visas, increasingly tried to enter the United States at unguarded points along the borders. A direct consequence of this new national immigration policy was the need for a more effective border patrol.

Congress responded to this need by passing an act on May 28, 1924, that created the U.S. Border Patrol. The initial force was selected from civil service registers for railway postal clerks and immigrant inspectors. This small band of officers was given the responsibility of combating illegal entry and the growing business of alien smuggling. During the first few months of operation, Border Patrol officers were not uniformed and had nothing more than their

badges to distinguish them from other citizens. This situation gave smugglers, illegal aliens, and others an excuse for ignoring their commands, thereby endangering the lives of the officers. This was remedied in December 1924 when an official uniform was adopted.



Figure 2. Agents checking traffic in California, circa 1927.
(INS Archive Photo)

Today, the Border Patrol is the largest uniformed federal law enforcement organization—with more than 8,000 of the best-trained, best-equipped agents anywhere. Working closely with other INS officers, Border Patrol Agents help maintain borders that work—ones that facilitate the flow of legal immigration and goods while

preventing the illegal traffic of people and contraband. Operating in 22 states, they patrol the border by foot, vehicle, boat, bicycle, snowmobile, canoe and, of course, horseback.

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